

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 24498

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DEPT PLEASE PASS INTERESTED POSTS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: XF, FR, SY
SUBJECT: FRANCOIS-PONCET VISIT TO SYRIA; ARAB-
ISRAELI ASPECTS

1. SUMMARY: ELYSEE SECRETARY GENERAL FRANCOIS-PONCET, THROUGH ONE OF HIS ASSISTANTS, HAS PASSED ON TO US AN ACCOUNT OF HIS VISIT TO SYRIA EARLIER THIS WEEK. HE HAS ASKED THAT IT BE BROUGHT TO THE ATTENTION OF THE SECRETARY AS HE PREPARES FOR HIS NEGOTIATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST. THIS CABLE DESCRIBES ARAB-ISRAELI ASPECTS OF THE VISIT; LEBANESE ASPECTS WILL BE TREATED SEPTEL. FRANCOIS-PONCET HAS CONCLUDED THAT THE SYRIANS ARE NOT INTERESTED CURRENTLY IN PLAYING AN ACTIVE ROLE EITHER NEGATIVELY OR POSITIVELY IN THE ARAB-ISRAELI PROBLEM. HE ADDUCES TWO REASONS: FIRST, THE SYRIANS ARE TOTALLY PREOCCUPIED WITH LEBANESE PROBLEM, AND, SECOND, THEY BELIEVE THAT EVENTS ARE GOING IN THE DIRECTION THEY FAVOR (I.E., TOWARD THE TOTAL DISCREDITING OF SADAT'S INITIATIVE). FRANCOIS-PONCET THEREFORE BELIEVES THAT THE SYRIANS ARE NOT IN A HURRY, AND
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WILL NOT ACT TO EITHER HELP OR HURT SADAT. ONCE THE LEBANESE CRISIS IS OVER AND ONCE SADAT'S INITIATIVE HAS DEFINITELY ENDED IN FAILURE, THE SYRIANS WOULD THEN BE INTERESTED IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE, LARGER THAN GENEVA, UNDER UN AUSPICES. END SUMMARY.

2. READING FROM FRANCOIS-PONCET'S ACCOUNT OF HIS

THREE HOURS WITH ASSAD AND ONE HOUR WITH FOREIGN MINISTER KHADDAM AUGUST 1, ELYSEE INTERNATIONAL STAFF OFFICER PROVIDED THE FOLLOWING DESCRIPTION. ASSAD WAS SHARPLY CRITICAL OF SADAT'S INITIATIVE. NOT ONLY DID HIS TRIP TO JERUSALEM HAVE NO HOPE OF POSITIVE RESULTS BUT IT HAD SERIOUS NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES. ASSAD CITED FOUR. FIRST, IT DIVIDED THE ARAB WORLD, WHOSE UNITY IS NECESSARY FOR A SETTLEMENT. SECOND, IT INTERRUPTED THE NEGOTIATING PROCESS MARKED BY THE US-SOVIET DECLARATION OF OCTOBER 1977 WHICH ASSAD DESCRIBED AS FULL OF PROMISE. THIRD, SADAT PUT EXCESSIVE VALUE ON A US ROLE, WHICH PROVOKED A SOVIET REACTION AND LED TO ESTABLISHMENT OF SOVIET INFLUENCE IN THE HORN OF AFRICA AND IN AFGHANISTAN. FOURTH, SADAT LED THE US INTO A DIPLOMATIC IMPASSE FROM WHICH THE US IS NOW UNABLE TO EXTRICATE ITSELF.

3. FRANCOIS-PONCET ASKED HOW THE SYRIANS SEE THE PEACE PROCESS PROGRESSING FOLLOWING THE SETBACK OF THE PAST FEW WEEKS. ASSAD SAID THERE IS A NEED FOR AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE. IT WOULD BE POSSIBLE TO ACTIVATE GENEVA, BUT IT WOULD BE BETTER TO HAVE A MEETING MORE AMPLE THAN GENEVA AND UNDER UN AUSPICES. ACCORDING TO ASSAD THIS WOULD PERMIT THE ASSOCIATION OF OTHER COUNTRIES IN THE PROCESS, PARTICULARLY EUROPEAN COUNTRIES INCLUDING FRANCE. KHADDAM TOLD FRANCOIS-CONFIDENTIAL

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PONCET LATER THAT SUCH A CONFERENCE HAD BEEN SUGGESTED TO ASSAD BY WALDHEIM. KHADDAM SAID THAT THE PALESTINIANS SHOULD BE REPRESENTED AT THE CONFERENCE AND THAT THE PLO SHOULD BE THE PALESTINIAN REPRESENTATIVE. FRANCOIS-PONCET GOT THE IMPRESSION THAT THE SYRIANS DID NOT EXCLUDE THE POSSIBILITY OF SOME COMPROMISE ON THE QUESTION OF PALESTINIAN REPRESENTATION AT THE CONFERENCE.

4. FRANCOIS-PONCET ASKED ASSAD ABOUT THE STATE OF ARAB SOLIDARITY. ASSAD CONFIRMED THAT THE RECENT

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TRIP BY PRINCE FAHD HAD BEEN DIRECTED AT A RAPPROACHMENT BETWEEN EGYPT AND SYRIA AND THE RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF ARAB UNITY. FRANCOIS-PONCET'S UNDERSTANDING IS THAT SYRIA IS READY FOR A RECONCILIATION OF ARAB COUNTRIES BUT ON TWO CONDITIONS. FIRST, SADAT MUST RECOGNIZE THAT HIS INITIATIVE HAS FAILED AND MUST GIVE UP PURSUING IT. SECOND, IN THE FUTURE SADAT SHOULD ACCEPT SUBMISSION TO AN ARAB CONSENSUS AND SHOULD RENOUNCE ALL INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVES. IF SADAT ACCEPTED THOSE CONDITIONS, SYRIA WOULD BE READY TO PARTICIPATE IN AN ARAB SUMMIT THAT COULD MEET IN THE FALL.

5. FRANCOIS-PONCET CONCLUDED THAT THE SYRIANS ARE NOT IN A HURRY TO SEE SADAT FAIL. AT THE MOMENT LEBANON OCCUPIES ALL THEIR POWERS OF CONCENTRATION. MOREOVER, THEY ARE SATISFIED THAT EVENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST WILL LEAD INEVITABLY TO SADAT'S FAILURE, AND THEY DO NOT FEEL PRESSED TO HASTEN THAT FAILURE. FRANCOIS-PONCET CONCLUDED THAT THE SYRIANS WOULD DO NOTHING IN THE ARAB-ISRAELI FRAMEWORK EITHER TO HELP SADAT OR TO CREATE ADDITIONAL DIFFICULTIES FOR HIM. IN THE LONG TERM, HOWEVER, THE SYRIANS WANT SADAT FAILURE TO BE CONFIRMED. IF THAT CAN HAPPEN, IF THE LEBANESE CRISIS IS SETTLED, AND IF ARAB UNITY CAN BE RESTORED, THE SYRIANS SEE THEMSELVES IN AN
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EXCELLENT POSITION, ACCORDING TO FRANCOIS-PONCET.

6. IN A CONVERSATION WITH THE DCM, MFA SECRETARY GENERAL SOUTOU PROVIDED SOME ADDITIONAL INSIGHT INTO FRENCH THINKING ON THE ARAB-ISRAELI SITUATION. SOUTOU BELIEVES THAT SYRIAN POLICY IN LEBANON IS DICTATED BY DAMASCUS'S DESIRE TO IMPROVE ITS POWER POSITION VIS-A-VIS ITS MAJOR RIVALS EGYPT AND IRAQ.

ON THE GENERAL ARAB-ISRAELI SITUATION, SOUTOU MADE A STRONG DEFENSE OF SADAT AND URGED THAT HE NOT BE PUSHED TO MAKE ADDITIONAL CONCESSIONS. SOUTOU IS PERSONALLY GLOOMY, FEELING THAT SADAT'S INITIATIVE IS NEARING ITS END. IF SADAT DOES FAIL, SOUTOU BELIEVES THE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM -- WHICH SADAT HAD SUCCEEDED IN GETTING ONTO THE BACK BURNER -- WILL RE-EMERGE IN A DAMAGING WAY. SOUTOU IS ALSO CONCERNED THAT SADAT, REALIZING HIS INITIATIVE IS DOOMED, MIGHT BE TEMPTED TO MOVE BACK TOWARD THE SOVIETS AND THE RADICAL ARABS IN AN EFFORT TO REDUCE HIS ISOLATION. SOUTOU SAID THAT, IF SADAT FAILS, THE FAILURE WILL HAVE BEEN TOTALLY THE RESPONSIBILITY OF BEGIN. AT THAT POINT THE US WILL HAVE TO RESUME A MAJOR ROLE AS ARBITER; SOUTOU'S HOPE WAS THAT, IF THINGS COME TO THAT PASS, THE US WOULD FIND THE COURAGE TO SAY THAT BEGIN HAD BEEN THE CAUSE OF SADAT'S FAILURE. HARTMAN

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